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SUBJECT: ANATOMY OF THE MOST POPULAR TUNISIAN NEWSPAPER:
ASH SHOUROUQ

Classified By: CDA David Ballard, for reasons 1.4 (c) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: With a circulation of 80,000, Ash Shourouq is Tunisia's most widely read, most anti-American, and most irresponsible Arabic language daily newspaper. Nominally private, Ash Shourouq receives direct editorial input from GOT officials in both the presidential palace and the MFA. The anti-American editorial line of the newspaper appears to serve GOT interests in permitting anti-American sentiment to be a distraction from public attention to local issues. End Summary.

History of the Paper

¶2. (S) Ash Shourouq was originally founded as a weekly newspaper in 1984 by Slaheddine Amri. Targeted at Tunisian youth, Ash Shourouq became a daily newspaper in 1988, at which point its daily circulation was only 20,000. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Ash Shourouq adopted a very clear pro-Iraq and Arab nationalist editorial line that proved popular with Tunisians. The circulation rose to 140,000. From then and up to the fall of Saddam Hussein, it was widely rumored that Ash Shourouq received financing from the Iraqi government; what was unclear was whether this financing was direct financial support or other kinds of perks such as automobiles, and paid vacations to Baghdad. (NOTE: Current Iraqi ambassador to Tunisia believes funding was direct and is trying to prove it to protest to the GOT. Foreign funding of the media is illegal in Tunisia. END NOTE)

¶3. (U) Amri died in 2002, at which time his widow took over the de-facto management of the newspaper, in contravention of Tunisian press laws that require a de-jure change in ownership upon the death of the founder. The circulation currently stands at 80,000 (although some say that 10 people read each copy sold), and the editorial line remains staunchly Arab nationalist, pro-Baathist, pro-Saddam Hussein and anti-American. Ash Shourouq remains the single most visible newspaper in Tunisia, as it is the newspaper most likely to be in the hands of the common person. Embassy personnel who travel around Tunisia have noted that Ash Shourouq is sometimes the only newspaper available on the newsstands, particularly in remote areas of the country.

A Look Inside

¶4. (U) Ash Shourouq prides itself on its anti-American stance and daily publishes front page photos and headlines, followed by pages of articles (many of which contain misinformation or disinformation), that portray US policy and actions in a negative manner. As the newspaper does not subscribe to any of the wire services, the editors and

journalists rely on the Internet or reports from Arab television, such as Al Jazeera, for their stories. And, in fact, many of the articles are actually credited to "listening" to Al Jazeera. Ash Shourouq features daily articles and photos of wounded American military personnel, with headlines assuring that the "resistance" is winning in Iraq and praising Saddam Hussein as the "President" and "hero" of Iraq. The newspaper has seized upon the Abu Ghraib scandal, the alleged Haditha massacre, the Guantanamo detention facility, and other such stories as excuses to print and reprint the same bloody and inciteful photos to prove American cruelty and contravention of human rights in Iraq and elsewhere. Headlines trumpet: "Resistance triumphs...brutal attack by Marines on civilians."

15. (U) Ash-Shourouq's editorial policy is predictable and formulaic in its treatment of regional and international issues: illogical praise for both Iran and Zargawi (both are good because they defy Americans, even though Zargawi wanted to eliminate Shia); admiration for Hugo Chavez; Saddam is a hero; the Iraqi resistance will win, the Shia in Iraq are enemies (unless they are killing Americans); and, the Americans, no matter what they are doing, are against "us." Stories and information ferreted out from unknown websites, unidentified "Agencies," and unnamed sources are used to bolster and prove the allegations in editorials and front-page articles. Photos from three years ago of US Marines and bloodied civilian Iraqi corpses are used to illustrate stories today and yesterday without date or attribution. Headlines are twisted to fit the line of the paper, even if the contents of an article contradict them. The sole unifying editorial principle seems to be anti-Americanism.

16. (C) Ash Shourouq dedicates the bulk of its newspaper to international news, so local coverage remains sparse but very loyal to the GOT. In addition to its anti-Americanism, Ash Shourouq has also become known as the newspaper that prints brutal attacks on Tunisian human rights activists and others who are out of favor with the GOT. In 2005, Ash Shourouq published an unsigned editorial on Tunisian activist Sihem ben Sedrine which equated her to a prostitute. This year, the newspaper took on activist Neila Hachicha, criticizing her for her outreach to foreign governments.

17. (S) Ash Shourouq is also known for its sports coverage, which many locals cite as the reason they read the newspaper. Tunisian journalists note, however, that the sports coverage is no better than that presented in other media, and suggest that it is the combination of anti-Americanism and sports that create the market for Ash Shourouq.

The Role of the GOT

18. (S) Information on direct GOT control of Ash Shourouq is abundant. Ash Shourouq journalists have confirmed (including publicly in an article published on alarabiya.com) that Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelwaheb Abdallah (who spent years in the presidential palace prior to his 2004 MFA appointment) is in daily contact with Abdelhamid Riahi (the editor-in-chief) and Fatma Karray (the editor-in-chief of international news), directing the editorial content of the domestic coverage. This fact was separately confirmed by a Tunisian journalist close to the APAO, who informed us that he had been invited to take over the editorial direction of Le Quotidien, Ash Shourouq's tamer French language sister. He reported that he asked Riahi directly if this would mean daily interaction with Abdallah. When Riahi answered in the affirmative, the journalist declined the promotion offer. A source at the newspaper also informed the APAO that it is rumored that Amri pays Abdallah TD2500 each month as a kick-back for the continued existence of a newspaper that remains illegal.

19. (S) Ash Shourouq journalists (many of whom we have gotten to know through their participation in International

Visitor programs) also report that they routinely receive unsigned editorials from the Palace that they include in the newspaper as part of their editorial line. These editorials attack human rights activists and oppositionists and underline the wisdom of GOT policy.

¶10. (S) Abderaouf Mkadmi, Ash Shourouq editor-in-chief of local news and a moderate Sufi, explained that his recent temporary removal as editor in chief of domestic issues was a direct decision by Abdallah who, according to Mkadmi, did not appreciate the fact that Mkadmi was spending time at the palace with Mkadmi's political patrons: Presidential Political Advisor Mahmoud Mhiri and Presidential Special Advisor and Spokesman Abdalaziz Ben Dhia. Mkadmi was temporarily assigned to cover cultural news. Mkadmi reported that Karray and Riahi became nervous at the possibility that Mkadmi might be gaining political strength to take over the reigns of Ash Shourouq and therefore asked Abdallah to step in. According to Mkadmi, Abdallah made a few phone calls, including to the widow Amri, who then informed Mkadmi of his change in status.

What this Means for Us

¶11. (U) Ash Shourouq's inciteful and irresponsible coverage is not unique in the region. However, its reporting increases distrust and dislike of American policy, and by extension American people, and its Arab nationalist, pro-Saddam rhetoric encourages Tunisian youth to participate in terrorist actions in Iraq and around the world.

¶12. (U) The Embassy has raised this issue consistently with Ash Shourouq editors (both in private discussions and in letters to the editor, many of which the newspaper refuses to print) and with GOT officials, including Abdallah. The former insist publicly on their right to their own editorial line and privately explain that anti-Americanism is the key to their financial success. The latter insist that freedom of the press in Tunisia bars them from interfering with Ash Shourouq's editorial line.

Future of the Newspaper

¶13. (C) Most Tunisian intellectuals and journalists assure Embassy staff that Ash Shourouq's future is dim, citing the

fact that, once the Americans leave Iraq, the newspaper will have little to write about. Others argue that just as many Tunisians are now switching from Al Jazeera to more moderate news commentary and/or entertainment issues (however, we have no evidence of this) and the Tunisian public will soon grow disillusioned with Ash Shourouq's predictions of a "resistance" victory in Iraq and the fulfillment of the dream of Arab nationalism. Some even assure us that the reported circulation of Ash Shourouq is inflated and that the numbers are actually falling. (Comment: We would like to believe this, if only we did not continue to see the newspaper being read at every bus stop and market stall in Tunis.)

Comment

¶14. (S) What is clear is that the normal press work of responding to the most egregious of articles, writing letters to the editor, and sending journalists on exchange programs will not change Ash Shourouq's editorial line and policies in the short term. Direct pressure brought to bear on those GOT officials who support and encourage this editorial line by the USG may also undermine our support for freedom of the press in Tunisia. Ash Shourouq also performs an important function for the GOT. Given Abdallah's direct control over the newspaper (both its personnel and its contents), it is obvious that the GOT prefers that popular sentiment be focused on American policy in the region and not on domestic themes of human rights, unemployment, and corruption that could cause more local discontent. The GOT's manipulation of

the press to support its own domestic policy by criticizing US policy further strengthens our MPP priority of sustained and active engagement for greater freedom of expression in Tunisia.

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